

THE LADY BEATRICE.

A STORY of VENICE.

by Mrs. MARY V. SPENCER.

It was a golden sunset, and the fair waters of the Brenta, flowed on sparkling with unwonted effulgence, while the western sky glowed, like a city on fire, along the summits of the distant hills, when a young man of noble exterior, but simply attired in the guise of a student, might have been seen wending his way through the rich grounds attached to the summer palace on the Brenta of the Vivaldo family of Venice. From the caution with which the student moved—now concealing himself in the shrubbery if a footstep was heard approaching, and now venturing out, when the footstep had passed, but yet moving only through the most secluded pathways—it was evident that he was there on some secret mission. That his object was not mean or unworthy, however, might have been seen by the most casual glance at his face and mien. His brow, scarcely concealed by his low student's cap, was high and ample; his dark eyes shone with a brilliancy and genius that betokened him of no common order of mind; and the whole character of his face was that of a high-minded, resolute, and intellectual man. Nor was his bearing less marked. His figure was singularly beautiful; graceful, well-knit, and athletic—and the proud step with which he strode on his way might well have become an emperor's son. His progress, however, was soon brought to a close, by his arrival before a small ruined Gothic chapel. Here he stopped, but instead of entering the ruins, he noiselessly secreted himself in the neighboring shrubbery, and watched cautiously to see if the chapel was tenanted.

A slight rustling, as of a female dress, soon convinced him that the person he sought was already in the ruin, and withdrawing from his concealment he advanced toward the chapel; but before he had gone many steps he stopped, as if involuntarily, to gaze on her he sought. Often had he looked on that fair girl before; but now she seemed to him even lovelier than ever. And rare and wonderful indeed was her surpassing beauty! At the moment when her figure

met the vision of the young student she was leaning on an old ivy grown tomb of some crusading knight; and chance, as if to heighten her extraordinary loveliness, had placed her in a position where every thing around seemed to be arranged after the most picturesque effect. Far away in the background could be seen the landscape, dotted with woods, villas, gentle hills, and here and there the glittering waters of the Brenta; while over all the declining sun had flung a mantle of glory such as Guido, with almost divine inspiration, has transferred to the canvass, to be at once a reproach and wonder to the world. In the rear, and on the right of the maiden, rose up the shattered shaft of a window, with a portion of the rich tracery work above, all covered with ivy, still hanging from the top. On the other side of the fair girl was a massy cross, rude and grey, yet unshaken by time—a fitting emblem of that religion of which it is a type, and which, in the words of Holy Writ, "endureth forever! But the maiden herself!—she was the all in all of the picture.

The age of the maiden could not have been more than nineteen. Her tresses were of that pale gold so rare under an Italian sky, and her dark soft eye was of the deepest azure tint. She was attired in a simple white dress, with no ornament but a rose placed in her bosom. Her hands, on which she leaned, were folded on a book; but her eyes were cast pensively down, betraying that her thoughts were far away from the storied page.

Her features were exquisitely moulded, and yet her face was full of expression. The snowy forehead; the classic eye-brow; the dark, soul-lit eye ; the small, rosy, pouting mouth; and the cheek, that one would have thought chiselled out of marble, but for the delicate rosy tint which pervaded its thousand veins,—these alone would have made their possessor remarkable every where for her beauty; but when to them was superadded her expression of countenance—that looking forth of the inner soul through the features—so holy, sweet, and pensive, so womanly, and yet so angelic, earthly melancholy softened by a heavenly endurance—when all these were superadded, we say, the whole produced on the spectator's mind, an impression of exceeding loveliness—a loveliness such as no sculptor has rivalled, and which even Raphael, that most glorious of painters, has but feebly shadowed forth. The student's eye brightened as he gazed, and he murmured to himself half audibly.

"Sweet girl —she is not all forgetful of me then, as they would have me believe. She even now, perhaps, is thinking of me, and of our mutual difficulties— else why so sad?"

The last words were spoken unconsciously in a louder tone, so loud indeed that they attracted the maiden's attention. She started, looked up, and while the crimson blood dyed her cheek, brow, and even bosom, advanced joyously to meet the student.

"Beatrice—my own sweet one," murmured the lover —for such the student was— "do I again see you after so long an absence, in despite of your unnatural stepfather, I may almost say in despite of Fate itself!"

"Yes, Adauta," said the lady at length, raising her head from his bosom where for a moment it had reposed, and looking smilingly, yet with all a woman's devotion, upon her lover's face, "we meet once more—and oh! how unexpectedly. But when,—how, whence did you comet I thought you at Padua still. But said you not that I was sad? —indeed, Rinaldo, it was not so. I —I— only was thinking..."

"You were thinking, sweet love," he fondly interrupted her, "of the clouds that seem to lower around our fate,—God knows they are dark enough!" and then, Ha if his thoughts grew gloomier at the recollection, he added, "and I am at times almost minded to despair, and go as an adventurer after those rich lands which Christoph Colon has but lately discovered far, far away to the westward of the pillar of Hercules. The enmity of your step-father—his power in Venice—and my own ruined fortunes, have tempted me a thousand times to leave Italy forever—for oh! Beatrice," he added fervently, "never, never will I make you the bride of a beggar, an outcast, or a proscribed man—and all these I will be if I continue much longer in Venice, braving the hate of the house of Vivaldo."

"Stop, stop, Rinaldo," eagerly said the maiden, "your fancy is now the father of your fears. Dark as our fates seem they will not always continue so. The night must break, and it is even now breaking, for the darkest hour is just before the

dawn, and can our destiny be gloomier than now? Believe me," she added enthusiastically, "we shall see better times. The hate of my step-father though deadly cannot be eternal—even a councillor of Venice is not all powerful—your own house, though ruined in fortune now, has a gallant name, and may yet be restored to its former power and glory—in short, a thousand things may elapse before another twelvemonth which may change the whole current of our fate, and, and—"

"Give us to each other," interposed the lover, folding the blushing girl enthusiastically again to his bosom, the whole current of his feelings changing by her words— "You give me new life, Beatrice—I was but a child to despond as I have done. But it was only a momentary feeling—one of those clouds that will flit over the soul mysteriously at times, and which may or may not be presentiments of evil But they have past. I feel nerved now for any act.

"Promise only to be mine if I come to claim you in a year, and nothing shall then check my career to glory. You have given me the clue to success —bless you for it!— and I will rebuild the fallen fortunes of our house. Then even a Vivaldo will not refuse me a daughter of his house. At Padua I have dreamed away too many precious hours, and though the verses I then wrote—do you remember them, Beatrice?—first won me your love; yet I fear me, since then, I have been wasting in literary studies the days and nights that should have been spent in the tented field. I have dreamed over Dante and Petrarch when I should have been leading squadrons to the charge," and as he ceased, the glow of his features, and the vivid brilliancy of his eye, showed that the spirit of the soldier was burning within the poet's bosom.

"But where will you go? —will you leave Italy?— shall I not see you or hear from you for a whole year?" said Beatrice, her woman nature triumphing for a moment over everything else. It was now the student's turn to be the comforter, and he replied,

"I know not yet scarcely where I shall go. There is good service to be had at Naples, and there are wars enough beyond the Alps to flesh all the swords in Christendom, to say nothing of a chance against the Moslem, which may yet

turn up if the horizon in that quarter does not speedily brighten. Fear not, Beatrice —since I have made up my mind, all will go well. My absence may lead your persecutors to think that I have abandoned the pursuit of your hand, and they may therefore remit their tyranny over you. If God, and our patron of St. Mark smile on me, you shall hear from me before six months have gone. In a year, at most, I will be at your feet. Then you will be your own mistress, and can be mine in defiance of Vivaldo. When I left Padua, some such plan as this, was dimly floating through my mind, but your words have given it a shape, and I shall enter on its execution satisfied that I have the prayers of one of the brightest and best of women to go with me."

For some time the lovers conversed in a low tone. While they are thus engaged, we will briefly sketch so much of their former history as has not been shadowed forth in their conversation.

The lady Beatrice was the daughter of a noble Venetian house, which had become allied by marriage with the powerful family of the Vivaldo. From her youth she had been remarkable for her beauty,—and, at an early age, she was already sought for by more than one noble of Venice. But her step-father, in whose guardianship she was now placed, had destined her to be the bride of his nephew, a proud, fierce, but powerful noble, and the head of the Vivaldo house. The character of the suitor alone would have prevented Beatrice from loving him; but even at that early age she had been inspired with a passion for another. This person was no other than the author of some poems which at that time were the delight of Italy; but who the poet was no one knew. His writings were anonymously circulated in manuscript, and the most that could be discovered, by diligent enquiry, was, that the writer resided at the university of Padua, at that time one of the most renowned schools in Italy.

Chance, however, discovered the writer to Beatrice; for, one day, attending mass in the church of St. Mark, she noticed a noble looking young cavalier gazing intently on her. After the service was over, and she retired, she observed that the cavalier followed her cautiously and at a distance in his gondola. There was something in the stranger's mien which interested Beatrice in him, and she thought of him in her dreams throughout the livelong night. The next day the

gondola of the cavalier shot by her window, and—but why need we protract the story? They met, often, daily. Some mysterious link seemed to unite the soul of Beatrice with that of the cavalier. There was in his earnest eye, in his eloquent tones, and in the constant play of his fine countenance a witchery which the heart of that imaginative young girl might not resist; and when she learned that the cavalier was none other than the poet over whose impassioned sonnets she had often wept, her bosom yielded, at once, and without a struggle to the delicious feelings which stole, like a dream, over her. She loved—loved for the first time—loved with all the intensity of a warm and innocent young heart.

There was one thing, however, which in their mutual transport the lovers had forgotten—and that was the well known determination of Vivaldo to wed Beatrice to his nephew. The young poet, though descended from a noble house, was but a poor scholar at Padua ; and the haughty guardian of Beatrice would sooner have seen her in her grave than have wedded her to the penniless Signor Adanta. Alas! too soon were the lovers made aware of this. Betrayed by the maid of Beatrice, they were torn apart, and while Adanta was left wounded almost to the death, Beatrice was hurried off to her guardian's summer house on the Brenta. Long months elapsed before the lovers heard of each other, during which time Beatrice suffered from a high fever, brought on by her ignorance of her lover's fate. Her lover too but slowly recovered from his wound. At length Adanta was able to leave his chamber. His first duty was to endeavor to see Beatrice, and in this endeavor, after surmounting incredible difficulties, he succeeded. Beatrice was pale with recent illness. In vain they essayed to form some plan by which to escape from their difficulties; for while they were yet conversing on the subject, the spies of Vivaldo discovered the lovers, and Adanta only escaped by the most determined bravery. From that hour every attempt at an interview betwixt the lovers had been foiled by the myrmidons of Beatrice's guardian. Watched incessantly, she found it impossible even to open a communication with her lover. Meantime her guardian grew every day more pressing in his demand that she should marry his nephew. Beatrice, however, finally refused. Her love for Adanta only strengthened under persecution. And daily did those persecutions increase, until life became almost intolerable, and she sank into that state of pensive melancholy, from which she

was aroused by the unexpected appearance of her lover, as we have just narrated.

While we have been relating these facts, the two lovers had been engaged in telling each others history since they last met. But Beatrice only revealed half the persecutions she endured, fearful, if she told the whole truth, that her lover's fiery nature would break out in some act of signal revenge. Her judgment saw that the resolution to which he had come was the wisest for both; and she only prayed that he might set out in safety, trusting with all a woman's hopefulness that, at the end of the promised time, he might return to claim her for his bride.

"And now, dearest," said her lover, "I must go. The shades of evening are already darkening the valley. Your absence from the house, if prolonged, will attract notice. The saints only know by what good fortune I made my way unobserved to this, your favorite retreat. Sancta Maria must smile on us, else we should have been seen ere now by some of Vivaldo's myrmidons— God's curse be on them! Again, farewell!" and with these words, tearing himself from the weeping girl, he darted into the neighboring shrubbery. Pausing a moment, he waved his hand and said, "before a year— remember!" and then diving deeper into the underwood, was lost, the next moment, to the sight.

For many minutes after the form of her lover had disappeared, Beatrice stood gazing on the spot where he had last been seen. Then, heaving a deep sigh, she slowly left the chapel, and returned to the house. Had she seen the dark malicious expression of the eye of a dwarf, who, the next moment, stepped from behind a ruined arch of the chapel, she would have felt that her lover's and her own conversation had been overheard, and that before an hour, Vivaldo would be in possession of all their plans.

The moon was yet scarcely above the tree-tops when the Duke Vivaldo entered the chamber where Beatrice sat musing on her late interview with her lover. She started at the sound of approaching footsteps, and rose to receive her guardian. He waved her sternly to be seated. Auguring from his manner the errand on which he came, the lady sank trembling into her seat. It was some

moments before the Duke spoke, during which delay he kept his cold grey eye fixed sternly on the lady Beatrice, as if he would have read her very soul. At length he began,

"Lady," he said, "I have sought you, at this unseasonable hour, in order to tell you to prepare to return to Venice in the morning. The waters of the Brenta," he continued ironically, "methinks grow unhealthy, and such late hours as you have kept to-night do not agree with you. In Venice there will be no occasion to loiter in old ruins until after twilight." And then suddenly dropping his sarcastic tone, he continued, "but I see you understand me, and I will speak plainly to you. Know then, that I am in possession of what passed at your stolen interview with your lover—I know all your plans. You foolishly thought that you could meet unnoticed,—but I have spies on your every action. I am apprized of your most secret thoughts. Longer disguise is useless betwixt us. You need not clasp your hands and look imploringly up to heaven. You are in my power, and, having undertook to brave my will, and persuade your lover that you and he could yet circumvent me, you shall know the full extent of that power. I have hitherto wasted my breath in persuading you to wed my nephew—henceforth I will persuade no more; but—by St. Mark!—wed him you shall. You have thrown down the gauntlet—we will see who proves the victor. One year," he continued, with increased bitterness, and an ill-concealed rage, "and you will be your own mistress—say you? Ay! if you continue unwed. But mark my words!—before the twelfth part of that time shall have elapsed, you will be the wife of the head of our house. You know me—you know I never trifle. Prepare then for what is inevitable. To-morrow by early dawn we shall set out for Venice. I leave you to think of the fate you have drawn on yourself," and, with these words, sneeringly bowing, the Duke left the room.

During this interview, the feelings of the lady Beatrice had almost overpowered her reason. The sneering look of the Duke at his entrance foreboded the object of his visit,—and his words soon left no doubt of his intentions. Beatrice saw, at once, that she had been discovered and betrayed. The threat of the Duke filled her with no idle fears. She knew that in Venice the power of a guardian was almost illimitable, and that her sex were often made the victims of forced marriages.—In the seclusion of the vast palaces of the Venetian aristocracy,

deeds were often done which no human tongue ever made public. What wonder then that Beatrice shuddered at the fate impending over her? What wonder that she clasped her hands and raised her eyes to heaven imploringly? Friendless, and alone —with no protection in the law, and watched by the spies of her relentless guardian, so that she could not appeal to the few who might aid her, what escape was there for her? These thoughts rushed through her mind, and almost unnerved her. In vain she attempted to speak—to remonstrate with the Duke—to implore his pity. Her tongue clove to her mouth. She could not speak. And when he had departed, and she sank helplessly on her knees, she was unable to give utterance to a petition for help from heaven, until a flood of tears came to her relief.

Sleep fled the pillow of Beatrice that night Her situation seemed more hopeless the more she reflected on it. Oh!—she thought—if her lover only knew of her peril, how soon would he fly to her rescue. But then the thought occurred to her, what could he do to aid her?—and would not any interference on his part only end in the ruin of both? There were daggers enough in Venice to be bought for fifty ducats to remove all fear that the Duke would be foiled by Adanta. In whatever light she looked on her situation, there was the same absence of hope. Morning found her still fruitlessly revolving the probability of an escape from the peril which threatened her. And during their route to Venice the same thought occupied her mind. When the gloomy portals of the Duke's palace closed on her, she felt as if she was shut up in a living tomb. Nor was her despair mitigated when her guardian, conducting her to her chamber-door, said significantly,

"Here, lady is your home until you become the bride of my nephew. A week hence the ceremony will be performed," and with this warning he departed.

The lady Beatrice gazed around on the strange apartment which had been allotted to her, with the consciousness that, for her, it was only a prison, and she turned with a bitter smile from the tapestry which seemed to mock her desolation. She approached the window and gazed out. The canal was far beneath. She returned to the door and tried the lock. It was fastened. All escape was cut off. She was immured in a prison, from which she would have

no escape, until summoned to become the bride of the hated nephew of her guardian.

(To be continued).